

# The Role of the Sangha in the Modern World

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Buddhism is a religion, or call it a philosophy of life or whatever you will, with a specific sense of direction, covering a wide range of life activity in the world here and in yet another equally active range beyond the present. This necessarily implies that Buddhism contains within it diverse groups of humans, both men and women, at different levels of aspiration. Within them are also those who definitely opt to continue living within the lay community as well as those who choose to renounce their lay life and take to a life of renunciation with far greater transcendental expectations.

The word Sangha in Buddhism is collectively used from the time of the Buddha to refer to the organized body of Buddhist clergy of both sexes, i.e. *bhikkhu* and *bhikkhuni*. They are those who have declared in no uncertain terms their mission in life, that they wish to get beyond the painful predicament of life continuance at the worldly plane. This act is referred to as *sabba-dukkha-nissarana* or release out of all painful situations, both physical and psychic, which one goes through in the living process. To this is added the solemn declaration of the Buddhist renunciants or monastic aspirants that they must definitely realize their final Nirvanic goal which is phrased as *nibbāna-sacchikaraṇatthāya*, i.e. getting beyond all suffering. Lay persons invariably are made to fall in line with this in due course.

If the word clergy, like the word religion, has an exclusive copyright use for Christianity, let us indicate at the very outset that we use the word Sangha in Buddhism to refer to persons, both men and women, who have left their household and chosen to live a life of total celibacy in search of their spiritual

goal of Nirvana. We are not unaware of married Buddhist clergy in some parts of the world and of the defense put up in support of what they do. But we in Sri Lanka are unshakably in the Theravada tradition. This must be clearly understood both in Sri Lanka and in the world outside that in the Theravada tradition, celibacy or renunciation of sex is primarily an absolute must for those who take to the life of *pabbajjā*. This is indicated with absolute clarity in the Theravada Vinaya in the first monastic offence of *Pārājikā* of sexual indulgence or *methuna dhamma* which leads to forthright expulsion of the miscreant from the monastic community.

This total renunciation of worldly life of the household is referred to in Buddhism, nay in Indian religions as a whole, as *nekkhamma*. What underlies this spirit of renunciation has indeed to be basically an integral part of the life of every Buddhist as is unmistakably indicated as *nekkhamma saṅkappa* under the very second category of *sammā saṅkappa* or attitude-correction in the Noble Eight-fold Path. This exalted departure, also known to the Indians as *pabbajjā* yields us the term *pabbajita* as referring to the true renunciant, who leaves behind both persons and property of household life. Yet another term used in Buddhism for this true renunciant is the word *bhikkhu*. It means he who begs from the lay-community his four-fold needs [i.e. *siv-pasaya* or *catu-paccaya*] of food [*piṇḍa-pāta*] and clothing [*cīvara*], places of shelter for dwelling [*senāsana*] and medicaments in times of illness [*gilāna-paccaya-bhesajja-parikkhāra*]. The spirit of becoming monks and nuns in Buddhism being well and truly renunciatory in its very genesis, the intrusion of the idea of wage earners into the Buddhist Sangha in more recent times has to be viewed as being contagiously destructive, the pupil learning to copy his master ere long, and doing one better than the former.

An equally disastrous or even more damaging area of destruction in the life of the Buddhist renunciant, male or female, is the deflection in the area of professed interest. The final and the highest goal of religio-cultural achievement

for the Buddhist disciple should be none other than his attainment of the Samsaric release in Nirvana. Not continuous enjoyment of worldly comforts on the way. Not even the extravagant luxurious bliss in heavenly worlds [*dev-minis-sepa*]. The historical Buddha Śākyamuni Gotama attained Buddha-hood or his enlightenment at the age of thirty-five and for full forty-five years he witnessed with delight the same enlightenment which terminates *samsāric* continuance achieved here and now by his disciples, both men and women.

Some of them were near equals of the Buddha in age like Venerable Maha Kassapa. There were also very young ones like the Buddha's own son Rahula and young Culla Panthaka. Maha Kassapa was undoubtedly the grandest disciple within the Buddhist monastic order, appointed by the Buddha himself as his equal and even assigned the responsibility of instructing and guiding the younger fellow-trainees. Venerable Maha Kasapa never minced his words in carrying out what he was called upon by the Buddha to do.

If you know what you are about, he said, never mingle too freely with the lay community. These were some of the words he used: *na kulāni upabbaje muni* = let not the mendicant frequent lay families and *na gaṇena purkakkhato care* = never go about followed by crowds of lay people. He further added. It is not easy for the average mendicant to turn down the flattering offers the lay community make: *sakkāro kāpurisena dujjaho*. Little wonder that our Venerable Maha Kassapa never became a beloved or favourite of Sri Lankan Buddhists, neither of the monks nor of the laymen. He was very strict and demanding. He is adored elsewhere for his idealist firmness. He had the nerve and courage to stabilize a perilously rocking boat, soon after the passing away of the Master.

Even during the life time of the Master there were in the monastic community monks of diverse aptitudes and temperaments. Depending on their different intellectual capacities and the levels of their social backgrounds and cultural upbringing, it is not surprising that there emerged within the membership of the Sangha, Buddhist monks who soon began to show themselves as moving away

from the monastic ideals of early Buddhism. The story of the monk Ariṭṭha, the son of the vulture-trainer, which is reported in the Alagaddupama Sutta of the Majjhima Nikaya [MN. I. 130 ff.] is a very good example for our study. He made an audacious public statement challenging the declaration of the Buddha that incautious sensory gratification [*kāma*] is an unwholesome corrosive habit: ... *ye 'me antarāyikā dhammā vuttā Bhagavatā te paṭisevato n'ālaṃ antarāyā' ti.*

Yet another bhikkhu of the Buddha's day, Sāti by name, who was the son of a fisherman, held an erroneous belief that the self same Saṃsāric Consciousness [*viññāṇa*] of the human passes on from one existence to another, without any change: *tadev' idaṃ viññāṇaṃ sandhāvati saṃsarat anaññan 'ti* [Ibid. 256]. This was refuted and rejected by the Buddha himself.

Bhaddāli was yet another among the Buddha's disciples who challenged and protested against what the Buddha laid down as his teachings or as guide lines for good living. He pronounced that it was a vibrant healthy habit to live on one meal a day: *Ahaṃ kho bhikkhave ekāsana-bhojanaṃ bhuñjāmi. Ekāsana-bhojaṃ kho ahaṃ bhikkhave bhuñjamāno appābādhattaṃ ca sañjānāmi appātaṅkataṃ ca lahuṭṭhānaṃ ca balaṃ ca phāsu-vihāraṃ ca.* [MN.I.537]. Bhaddali refused to accept it.

All these instances clearly show that even during the life time of the Buddha there were disciples who wished to change and interpret the teachings of the Buddha in their own way, to suit their own wishes and fancies. In all these instances where the miscreants were brought before the Master, he was confident about his own position as the propounder of the new teaching and firm enough to point out the errors and chastise them for their errors of judgement. He was severe and stern in his criticism, every time he encountered them, calling them foolish and stupid [*mogha-purisa*].

The concept of being modern is quite often misunderstood as being deviant from an existing pattern of thinking or acting, to be in conformity with something

incredibly fleeting like time itself. Movement through time and space, in our opinion, does not by itself necessarily imply developmental change. Most of us have known it by experience that it can very well lead to decadence and degradation. It is as much true of individuals as of institutions.

The Buddhist Sangha itself has this dual aspect of character. Individually, they are persons, whether men or women, who have on their own left their household life in pursuit of the transcendental goal of finally terminating their journeying in Samsara, i.e. reaching their goal of Nirvana or *nibbāna-sacchikaraṇatthāya*. In this new area of self-chosen activity they are clearly guided by the religious instructions known as *dhamma* as to what they should do and what they should not do. In the face of disrespect for and challenge of the *dhamma*, the Master had to enforce discipline through a body of legal enactments which came to be called the *Vinaya* which was provided with powers both of prosecution and punishment. This is what led the *Vinaya* to be looked upon as the very life-blood of the Sasana: *Vinayo nāma Buddha-sāsanassa āyu*.

Collective bodies of these individuals at various levels of five, ten and twenty were empowered to maintain discipline and order within the Sangha and prosecute and punish offenders. In the corpus of the Theravada *Vinaya* called the *Patimokkha*, there are 220 and 304 individual rules called *sikkhāpada* for the men and women respectively. There are 7 additional statutes called *adhikaraṇa-samatha-dhammā* which both parties hold in common. The proper maintenance of these was to be checked by the monastic community every fortnight at a meant-to-be-solemn get together called the *Patimokkha Recital*. What time and place changes have done to these institutions is to be looked into by those in authority who need to have an interest in the survival of Buddhism in the world today.

We have by now made it clear that by Sangha is indicated a collective body of persons, possibly male and female, who have chosen to leave behind the pleasures and enjoyments [*kāma*] of household life in the world in pursuit of

something higher and transcendental. This is not within the pattern of the world, i.e. the life style of the lay community and is therefore called *lokuttara* or transcending the world. Those who renounce the world as *pabbajita* and get gradually promoted as *bhikkhus* and *bhikkhunis* of respectable seniority cannot and do not think of the luxurious grades of household pleasures like sex, food and drinks, and entertainment as befitting them even on account of changes of time and place, when and wherever they be. Any such thing would basically cut at the very root of monastic-life aspirations. There can possibly be no changes in these basic renunciatory characters of monastic life on account of the disastrously illusory character of the modernity of the changing world. The way to Nirvana ideally gets the humans of the world above and beyond the fluctuating changes of the world. That is why Nirvana comes to be called unconditioned or *asaṅkhata*.

There is yet another noteworthy area in the concept of the Sangha in the Modern World. Buddhism, well and truly, belongs to the ancient world of more than two and a half millennia ago. But its soaring cultural achievements, even today, are in a class by themselves. Within Buddhism, i.e. in the monastic community, young renunciants, of twenties, thirties and even forties, may look strange characters in the eyes of the lay community of a global society. They may appear not very different from cygnets who can mistakenly come to be called ugly ducklings.

But they have invariably to turn out to be, with proper discipline and grooming under adequate tutelage, the admirable swans of a later date. This is the enviable position which the Buddhist Sangha must reach in any part of the world at any time. True Buddhist disciples never come into conflict with any one any where in the world [*cātuddasī appaṭigho ca hotī*], happy and content are they all the time [*santussamāno itarītarena*] and intrepid in the face of all calamities of the world [*parissayānam sahitā achambhī*: all at Suttanipāta verse 42].

Thus establishing oneself to the best of one's ability in the exemplary position

of moral perfection as prescribed in one's religion, the Buddhist Sangha could, any where and everywhere, come to play a leader role in human society. This moral goodness of Buddhism does extend beyond the plane of humans. It does cover the realm of animals too. The safety and security of all life, together with their comfort and happiness is embraced therein as is unmistakably indicated under *sukhino vā khemino hontu sabbe sattā bhavantu sukhittā*.

This message has to be delivered to the world. Imperceptibly though, it is being received today. Scientific super-consciousness insists that respect for all life has to be the underlying philosophy for the survival of man on earth. This is the basic content of the lines quoted above, beginning with *sukhino va khemino hontu ...* Therefore the role of the Sangha in the modern world has to be the unadulterated delivery of this message through higher grade personal example. Example is better than precept.